

# Vanishing Culture: Keeping the Receipts

by Maria Bustillos

On August 13, 1961, the Sunday edition of *The Honolulu Advertiser* published its official Health Bureau Statistics (“Births, Marriages, Deaths”); on page B-6, in the leftmost column—just below the ads for luau supplies and Carnation Evaporated Milk—the twenty-second of twenty-five birth notices announced that on August 4, Mrs. Barack H. Obama of 6085 Kalanianaʻole Highway had given birth to a son. The Honolulu State Library subsequently copied that page, along with the rest of the newspaper, onto microfilm, as a routine addition to its archive. Decades later, as Donald Trump and his fellow “birthers” tried to deceive the public about the birthplace of the 44th president, researchers were able to read the item in its original, verified context, preserved on its slip of plastic film.

A dramatic fate like that one awaits very few reels of microfilm, but the story underscores the crucial importance of authentication, and of archiving. Verifying and making sense of records—books, photos, government documents, magazines, newspapers, films, academic papers—is a never-ending task undertaken not only by historians but also by researchers, journalists, and students in every branch of learning: in the sciences, in medicine, in literature and philosophy and sociology. This is scholarship—the job of sieving over and over through the past, to research the truth of it, to reflect on and comprehend it, in the hope of providing people with useful observations, ideas, and help. That’s why we need records as detailed and accurate as we can make them; that’s the ultimate value of librarianship and archival work.

When people foolishly—and even dangerously—imagine that the past won’t matter to the future, the chance to preserve history evaporates. We live in times of increasing book bans and censorship and fast-deteriorating online archives. Some writers are even willing to deny the lasting value of their own work, shrugging off its place in a unique cultural moment. In July, when the archive of MTV News was [summarily vaporized](#), contributor Kat Rosenfield [wrote dismissively](#) of her own work there:

So much of what we—what *I*—produced was utterly frivolous and intentionally disposable, in a way that certain types of journalism have always been. The listicles and clickbait of early aughts culture may differ in many ways from the penny press tabloids of the 1800s, but in this, they are the same: They are meant to be thrown away.

It’s a shocking thing, to hear a journalist say that the writing of the 19th-century penny press was “meant to be thrown away.” The rise of the [penny press](#) represents a key moment in the democratization of media; [Benjamin Henry Day](#), founder of the first such newspaper in the U.S., *The New York Sun* (“It Shines For All”), is a towering figure in the history of journalism. (His son, Benjamin Henry Day Jr., invented [Ben-Day dots](#)!)

Day offered nonpartisan newspapers at a cheap price to a mass working-class audience—a fascinating mix of hard-hitting news, sensationalistic crime reports, and plain whoppers. *The Sun* ran a deranged report of [winged people living on the moon](#), and it also [broke the story](#) of the Crédit Mobilier/Union Pacific corruption scandal in 1872, which brought down a whole herd of Republican congressmen, plus then-Vice President Schuyler Colfax. Day's rivals, James Gordon Bennett and Horace Greeley, founders of *The Herald* and *The New York Tribune*, respectively, were no less momentous figures in the history of news media. Their sociological, cultural and political impact reverberates still: [Bennett's racist, segregationist views](#) were hot issues in a *New York Times* story published just a few years ago, and a kaleidoscopically weird [July op-ed](#) in the *Idaho State Journal* called vice presidential candidate JD Vance “A Horace Greeley for Our Century,” despite the fact that Vance is a far-right reactionary conservative, in sharp contrast to Horace Greeley, who held openly socialist, feminist, egalitarian views.

\*\*\*

Pace Rosenfield, we can count ourselves fortunate that the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine has preserved [nearly half a million articles at MTV News](#); because of the Wayback Machine, future readers will have access to primary source materials on [Peter Gabriel's social activism](#), MTV News's Peabody Award-winning “[Choose or Lose](#)” voter information campaign, early coverage of the [allegations against pop icon Michael Jackson](#)—and all the details and facts that will be available to provide crucial background and verification for stories we can't yet imagine.

The MTV News archive joins the archives of Gawker, the *LA Weekly*, and many other shuttered digital-native publications that would have disappeared entirely from the internet but for the Wayback Machine. Many leading journalists have greeted the Wayback Machine's archival efforts with relief, and not only because it means preserving access to their own clips. They want all the receipts to be kept.

Tommy Craggs, a former executive editor at Gawker, expressed this idea [back in 2018](#): “There should be a record of your fuck-ups and your triumphs, too.” He viewed Gawker's archive as a valuable “record of how life was lived and covered on the internet for an era. Taking that away [would be] leaving a huge hole in our understanding.”

\*\*\*

What we call history is only the Now of an earlier time, recorded and preserved as best we can and reconsidered afterward. There is no complete and knowable record of any part of the past, no magical, permanently accurate “history.” The records we are keeping now—filled as they are with contradictions, uncertainties and errors—are all that tomorrow can inherit from today. Each teeming, incoherent moment succeeds the last, Now upon Now, wave upon wave of recordings and photographs, testimonials and accounts—true, false, and everything in between—gathered together by librarians and archivists and hurled forward like a Hail Mary pass into the future.

In other words, nothing is “meant to be thrown away.” Nothing. People may someday want to look into what happened in any part of the world, among any of its people, at any time; and

every researcher, reader, and writer will have their own ideas, ideas that we might find incomprehensible now, about what's worth keeping.

---

This essay is part of the Internet Archive's [Vanishing Culture](#) series, highlighting the power and importance of preservation in our digital age.